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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the response of the Chicago school district to an Illinois State board of education directive that local school districts have an ongoing program of assessing student achievement and educational programs. The minimum competency testing program in place before the directive is discussed. The testing program and the nongraded school structure are outlined as part of an instructional management program that provides both teacher and student with immediate feedback. Also described is an administrative management system that gives school principals information regarding student achievement and school climate. Finally, the process of balancing state and federal funds to support the testing system is considered. (APM)

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COMPETENCY TESTING

[CEMREL Paper 1]

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COMPETENCY TESTING

The Chicago public schools had a competency testing program in place before the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation encouraging such a program for all Illinois public schools. PA 80-1412, effective August 1978, required the Illinois State Board of Education to encourage local school districts to establish minimum competency testing programs and to provide them with procedures and materials to assist in the establishment of such programs by December 15, 1978. The State Board was also required to submit a report on minimum competency testing to the General Assembly by June 30, 1980, including recommendations for future legislation. That report and recommendations to the General Assembly will likely be deliberated in the session beginning in January 1981.

On the basis of two years of staff research and testimony gathered at public hearings over the state, the State Board recommended that a statewide minimum competency test should not be mandated for all Illinois students. They recommended, instead, that local school districts should have an ongoing program of assessing student achievement and educational programs. Criteria for designing local policies would require schools to provide individual student assessment at no fewer than two elementary grade levels and one secondary grade level. Moreover, no student could be denied graduation from school based on any single test. Local policies would be filed with the State Board of Education. Legislation would be needed to authorize the Board to provide monitoring and technical assistance to school districts. In addition, increased state funds would be necessary to aid school districts in implementing an assessment and student achievement program.

Because Chicago had a competency program, it was in a position to take an active part in the legislative process and to influence legislators in the direction of having each local district develop its own testing program rather than having one program developed for everyone at the state level. Often, when states mandate the test, there is no curriculum validity, and parents rightfully complain that students are being tested on things they have not been taught.

Curriculum validity is just one of four dimensions of a competency testing program which are important in order to avoid litigation. The other three dimensions are instructional validity, early warning, and remediation. Chicago's program was carefully constructed to include all four dimensions.

By way of context, the Chicago schools enroll some 477,000 students, 60 percent of whom are black, 20 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, and the remainder Asian and Native American. The staff includes 27,000 certified teachers and approximately 525 certified principals. In 1979-80, 647 elementary and high school sites were in operation, with a school district budget of approximately $1,500,000,000.

Educators have almost a moral obligation to get actively involved in legislation dealing with competency testing. Chicago was virtually the only district that had a functioning program when the Illinois legislature first began to consider the competency subject. Chicago fought hard for local control as opposed to a single statewide test. Many districts opposed any legislation. Chicago, however, felt that the way to exercise educational responsibility was not to oppose legislation, but to try to make sure that what was legislated was pedagogically appropriate. Clearly, the public pressure was in favor of some kind of legislation; our concern was that the

legislation be enacted in the most effective manner. Chicago said to the legislators, in effect, "We have a program which we will file with the state for review and approval, and we will provide data annually on our progress; allow us to proceed so long as we are getting the job done."

Implementing this approach successfully requires painstaking negotiation between the state and the local district so that local values and interests are taken into account. What does not work is for the state to say, "You do what we want, or we will apply sanctions against you." Local districts can follow the intent and spirit of the law and still formulate a competency program that allows for local values. Moreover, legislatures and state offices ought to allow local school systems to determine responsibility because they know the structure of the bureaucracy and know their own personnel. At times, who is in a position is not as important as who is able to do what is needed. Therefore, there has to be flexibility in terms of implementation procedures. State offices and legislatures should be more interested in guidelines and in whether or not the intent of legislation has been implemented rather than in the monitoring of what I call "administrivia."

What has been implemented in Chicago is a K-12 instructional management program comprised of a curriculum which is divided into a sequence of objectives and a criterion-referenced testing system which provides teacher and student with immediate feedback. When a student is ready to graduate from elementary school, he/she is given our minimum proficiency skills test for the first time. Approximately 63 percent of the students pass it at that time. These meet the high school graduation requirement regarding the minimum proficiency skills test. Those students who are not successful may

be enrolled in the Proficiency in Basic Skills course in the summer for no credit or in the following fall semester, at which time elective social studies credit is earned for successful completion of the course. Following the freshman year, those students who are unsuccessful in the test enroll in the course either during the summer or during the school year until successful passing of the test. Those students who pass the course and the test at the end of one semester receive .50 credit. Unsuccessful students must be enrolled in a second semester of the course to enable them to retake and pass the test. When the test has been passed, this student receives a credit of 1.00, indicating two semesters of enrollment. Because this course is a regular part of the social studies sequence, which is one of four majors required in high school, students who pass the test at the end of the course get elective social studies credit. If they do not pass the test, they do not get credit, and they must take the course again. It is a "mandated elective," so to speak. If they pass the course first time around, it does not become an additional cost factor because it is built into the social studies major. If students have to repeat the course, then it becomes an additional cost factor both in terms of money and in terms of student time. Passing the course is required for high school graduation and the awarding of a diploma. Chicago does not issue certificates to those who do not quality for diplomas. If a high school senior has not passed the proficiency course, he/she is counseled into the GED program at a junior college. In 1979 only 17 students out of the total graduating class had to be channeled into the GED program.

This kind of success rate indicates that our total program has instructional and curricular validity. Every item in the proficiency course and test is in the curriculum, and teachers have been alerted to emphasize those items.

Every teacher shares responsibility -- not just the teacher who is teaching the end-of-the-line remedial proficiency course.

Chicago has done away with so-called "social" promotions in the elementary school. All Chicago public elementary schools are organized in a nongraded structure titled Continuous Progress/Mastery Learning. This organization includes a primary program cycle (prekindergarten and kindergarten through year 3), an intermediate program cycle (years 4 through 6), and an upper program cycle (years 7 and 8). Continuous Progress/Mastery Learning is the promotion policy mandated citywide at the elementary school level.

Reading/language arts and mathematics curricula are structured on a continuum of skills from preschool/kindergarten through the eighth year. Science and social studies are structured on a continuum of major concepts from kindergarten through the eighth year. Children are assigned to groups and classrooms for instruction based upon their mastery of skills and concepts. Each child progresses at his own rate and teachers use the appropriate learning materials and activities for each child. Ad hoc small group instruction within the classroom is the instruction mode used by teachers to achieve mastery learning. Within each organizational program cycle, appropriate skills and concepts are assigned on a continuum of levels for mastery. The amount of time each child requires to complete each cycle varies with the rate of growth of each child. Analysis of the child's reading mastery record card must reflect minimum mastery of 80 percent of the key objectives on a cumulative basis for progression from one cycle to the next. Some children may require four years to complete the primary cycle. Others may complete the primary cycle in three or two years. The same is true of the intermediate and upper cycles. A decision to provide an additional year in a particular program cycle for a child may be made

at any time on an individual basis using a prescribed assessment process. A child provided with an additional year in any cycle does not repeat a total year, but, rather, continues at his/her own rate of learning with the required additional time.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills is the citywide standardized testing program. It is used in conjunction with the end-of-cycle test (a grouping of criterion test items from the criterion tests used in each cycle) and review of the child's learning pattern to determine placement each year or at the end of each cycle. The results of our criterion-referenced testing program correlate with the results of the standardized test.

Added to this instructional management system, we now have an administrative management system -- the School Improvement Plan. A school profile gives the principal information four times a year about the number of reading and math skills the children have mastered, and in which classrooms. It provides information on teacher and student attendance, vandalism, the amount of money spent on repairing broken windows, and other factors that make up an index of school climate. From these profiles, principals acquire data upon which to base such decisions as what staff development is needed, whether the textbook appropriation is being spent effectively, and what needs to be improved in the school climate. On the basis of these profiles, each principal sets goals which then become his/her performance appraisal plan. The district superintendent then utilizes this plan as the basis of his/her appraisal of the principal's performance. The distribution of accountability all through the system has been crucial to Chicago's program.

Some parent accountability has also been built into our program. Teachers

are given released time for parent conferences. If a student is not achieving or is absent frequently, the teacher must give evidence of having conferred with the parents, and the parents have to indicate what they have done about the child's absence. Sometimes this procedure results in the involvement of the school social worker if the parent's explanation for a student's absence is that he/she does not have clothes to wear to school. You have to look at the problem of achievement from every direction.

You have to look at achievement as a problem involving the total school system -- you cannot successfully attack it school by school. No matter how concerned the people in an individual school may be, they are largely helpless to mount a program that will have impact unless the central administration exercises its responsibility to put together a comprehensive, rational design that fits all of the pieces together.

Implementing such a comprehensive plan could be easier than it is if there were fewer constraints on federal dollars. The chief problem lies in categorical funding, which leads to categorical thinking. And that leads to a plethora of fragmented programs which make it necessary to create a bureaucracy to deal with a bureaucracy.

For example, we need money for what I call "peripheral hardware" in order to fully computerize our criterion-referenced testing program. In a desegregation program, which requires the moving around of students, a program is needed in which the monitoring and central design are employed systemwide. Such a program would be easier to implement if a terminal could be placed in each school; however, federal funds cannot be spent for this purpose.

Title I monies are so controlled that we must offer a smorgasbord of about 20 different programs. There is something invidious about a pullout Title I program which requires students to go to a reading program that differs from the system's program in order to meet a requirement that materials not be duplicated. It confuses students and teachers alike. It would make more sense if we could use Title I funds to buy the workbooks, worksheets, and self-tests which accompany the textbooks being used in our schools, but which we do not have money in our general funds to buy.

Another aspect of this problem is that each one of these federal programs has to have a staff development component. As a result, we must pull teachers out of classrooms and send in substitutes while we do staff development on the implementation of this specific program. Some schools have three or four programs, and the staff development associated with them is distasteful to teachers and contributes to discontinuity of the instructional program. Staff development should be generic rather than specific. Most of the staff development that needs to be done has to do with changing teaching style rather than teaching how to use these materials or what this program is about. If all the staff development money could be put into designing a generic program that would serve all the Title I programs and the total school program, we could do a lot more efficient and effective job. If you believe in intervention for students, you must believe in intervention for teachers; but it must be effective intervention. The answer is not the replacing of ineffective teachers, for ultimately you go to the same employment bureau, the human race. There is no other.

The evaluation requirements in the federal programs are as wasteful as the staff development regulations. It is not necessary to evaluate every program and every student. I would like to see the evaluations done on a sampling basis, with more of the evaluation money put into determining what kinds of things really make a difference. We need to be able to use some of that money to say to a faculty, "You're a Title I school; what problem do you want to solve?" We should get into more interactive research that involves teachers.

We should be able to apply federal money to total school improvement so that a certain number of dollars would go to a school, and the principal, the faculty, and the parents could put together a program of improvement to use those dollars. The Title I child is in a total school, affected by the learning climate and social system in that school. The child needs to be there rather than pulled out and placed in a group that provides only a mirror image of himself/herself. I believe that if a school qualifies, then all of the children in that school qualify, and the plan for using federal help should respond to what that total school needs in order to improve. That might be the addition of a full-time assistant principal who would do nothing but handle discipline problems and confer with parents. It might be the creation of an in-school suspension center. Whatever it is, more local discretion should be allowed. For example, the plan could be filed and reviewed, and we could provide evidence of accountability. A plan that is made on the federal level and handed to us is not the way to achieve real school improvement. What is fundable has to be what the school needs.

In addition, what is mandated has to be funded. We had a substantial shortfall in our mandated program of Special Education; as a result, we had to take money from the general program to run Special Education. Administrators should not have to make the kind of choice which requires them to shortchange some children to give to others.

On the state level, we have to get away from the per capita funding formula and into a differentiated allocation based on need. The quality of opportunity is not similar, and it is not democratic to put the same number of dollars behind each child. If a child needs bilingual education and that costs more, that is the child's basic program. If a child needs an intervention program and that costs more, that is his/her basic program.

State offices of education have to do a better job of translating the language of legislation into guidelines for school systems. They have a legal staff close to the legislators which should provide legal interpretations, especially for school systems that do not have a legal department. Such a procedure would avoid having someone from the state office audit a school district and say, "You have to pay back the money because you didn't do what the legislation said."

If government really wants to help improve the schools, they must start by asking local school people what they need and what kind of research should be funded. We have had too many professors with research grants who wish to use our students for their own purposes. They tell me, "It isn't going to cost you anything," and I say, "It is going to cost the time of teachers and students who don't need you at all." We must

sit down with teachers and design research studies to look at what the teachers say will help them do a better job in helping students become competent.